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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 002223

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/07/2017

TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR PBTS MOPS KDEM KISL PK IN

SUBJECT: INDIA-PAKISTAN STILL STUCK ON SIACHEN TALKS

Classified By: PolCouns Ted Osius, Reason 1.5 (B,D)

**¶1.** (S) Summary: Indian Defense Minister A K Antony traveled to the Army's Siachen base camp to demonstrate his administration's ongoing tough stance toward Pakistan in negotiations over troop withdrawal from the peaks surrounding the glacier, as well as to set a marker by which India can claim victory if negotiations result in both sides authenticating their positions on the ground. Our interlocutors say while Pakistan agreed in early April talks to authenticate its positions using satellite technology, they also asked for an agreement in writing that India occupies illegally the peaks it is currently holding. For India, this is a nonstarter, because it does not overcome India's lack of trust of Pakistan due to the Kargil standoff and the 1965 War. In this case, however, India has more to lose because Pakistan has an advantage in retaking territory if India agrees to pull its forces back. Nonetheless, discussion of creative initiatives, such as a plan to make the glacier and surrounding peaks into an environmental research reserve, have given new impetus and at least some forward momentum to the protracted dispute over Siachen. End Summary.

Antony Showing Strong Stance on Siachen

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**¶2.** (S) Indian Defense Minister A K Antony traveled to an Indian Army base camp near peaks surrounding the Siachen Glacier on May 5th, demonstrating his administration's respect for the sacrifices of Indian troops, and reiterating India's stance on the issue in talks with Pakistan. Indian press reports say Antony -- who declared that both sides must "authenticate actual ground positions" -- was sending a strong message to Pakistan that India will not be returning home any time soon. Reports say that while Pakistan is showing some flexibility on Siachen, no offer thus far satisfies India's concerns. Antony also noted the Army's efforts to reduce the environmental degradation along the peaks surrounding the glacier, removing human waste and garbage that cannot biodegrade in the freezing temperature, and which has piled up over the years while each country's

army maintains its steadfast position.

#### Pakistan Making Concessions...

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**¶3.** (S) Pakistani Political Counselor Zulfikar Gardezi told Poloff on May 4th that Pakistan had not been pleased with the 11th round of Defense Secretary talks on Siachen, which were held on April 6 - 7. While the Pakistani side had shown a new level of flexibility on the issue, they were disappointed with India's lagging response. Press reports later said Pakistan had agreed to authenticate each army's current position using satellite technology, meeting a key Indian demand. Indian MEA Under Secretary for Pakistan Affairs B. Shyam said, however, that the meeting was part of an ongoing series and did not result in any particular breakthroughs.

#### But India Lacking Trust

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**¶4.** (S) Praveen Swami, a journalist for The Hindu who maintains strong ties to Indian intelligence agencies, told Poloff on May 7th that while Pakistan agreed to authenticate positions using satellites, it asked that India agree in writing that it holds those positions illegally under previous UN agreements. Pakistan knows this, he claimed, so they would not have added this qualification if they did not want to stall the negotiations to press for forward movement on Kashmir. Swami said this was an almost "laughable" request that negates India's entire reason for demanding troop authentication. Kargil and the 1965 War -- in which

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Pakistan launched surprise attacks into Kashmir to retake territory -- taught India not to simply trust Pakistan blindly. Because of this, he explained, the agreement needs to give India some guarantee that Pakistan will not simply invade the peaks again if both sides withdraw. India knows that it will not be able to retake the territory it currently holds as fast as Pakistan because of the terrain involved, so it must find a deal that gives Pakistan an incentive not to reinvoke. Swami said the Indian security forces want any deal Congress makes on Siachen to justify a massive air-based attack by India if Pakistan makes a large-scale effort to retake the territory. If India agrees that it holds the peaks illegally, he claimed, international opinion will be against India, not Pakistan, in such a scenario.

#### Laying the Groundwork

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**¶5.** (S) Swami explained further, however, that Antony's Siachen visit may be designed to lay the ground work for an eventual settlement of Siachen, but only if India gets all that it is asking for. By declaring that India will not pull its troops back unless Pakistan agrees to "authenticate actual ground positions," he argued, Antony is preparing the Indian public to accept that India will have won the standoff if it makes this agreement. When Foreign Minister Mukherjee was Defense Minister, Swami explained, he became very concerned about the direction Prime Minister Singh was taking the negotiations because the PM came very close to making an agreement without winning this concession. Now both Antony and Mukherjee are pushing for it, but they believe it is an agreement Pakistan can make, especially if India shows some flexibility on Sir Creek. The problem for Pakistan, Swami declared, is that authenticating ground positions will mean that the general population will then know that Pakistan does not hold much of the territory around the glacier. Essentially, he said, they are nowhere near Siachen.

#### An Environmental Solution?

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**¶6.** (S) Swami also said Antony's references to the

environmental impact of the troops in the area was on the one hand designed to answer some critics of the Indian military, but on the other a reference to an alternative solution envisioned for the dispute. Swami said Indian military officer Brigadier Gurmeet Kanwal and Pakistani Brigadier Asad Hakeem had developed a proposal in 2005 at the Stimson Center in Washington, DC to make the Siachen glacier and surrounding peaks an area for environmental research. Specifically laboratories would be set up where each army's base camps now stand in order to carry out scientific research. Presumably, Swami commented, no one would dare try to occupy the area where the laboratories were set up. With environmental issues gaining so much interest at the moment, Swami said, the idea was factoring heavily into people's thinking.

Comment: Waiting for the Glacier to Melt

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¶7. (S) Multiple newspapers in India pointed out that the death rate in Siachen has dropped dramatically in recent years as the Indian Army has gotten better at acclimatizing soldiers to the harsh conditions gradually and reducing tours in the higher altitudes. The message Antony is sending is that India is in this for the long haul -- that it requires less sacrifice than it used to, that the Army's environmental impact is diminishing, and that Pakistan must meet India's demands to gain forward movement on the issue. He is also building a public dialogue about what a win for India would look like if India and Pakistan can finally reach a resolution.

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